

Robert K. Merton “Discrimination and the American Creed”

Main Point: Responds to Gunnar Myrdal’s articulation of the American creed as well as Myrdal’s “American dilemma.” Myrdal’s “American dilemma” describes the disconnect between the American creed, which values equal opportunity to justice, freedom and opportunity independent of ethnicity or group memberships. Merton describes four character types based on (dis)belief in the American creed and actions. The four character types, which Merton calls the “All-Weather Liberal,” “Fair-Weather Liberal,” “Fair-Weather Illiberal” and “All-Weather Illiberal,” gain their meaning from different juxtapositions of prejudice and discrimination.

Central Issues and Concepts:

- Prejudice and discrimination are not always seen together, there are several combinations of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions, which should influence the assessment of social problems and policies.
- People range from “All-Weather Liberal,” meaning neither prejudiced in attitude nor discriminatory in behavior, to “All-Weather Illiberal,” meaning both prejudiced and discriminatory. In between are the “Fair-Weather Illiberal” and “Fair-Weather Liberal.” These two may act similarly, however, the “Fair-Weather Illiberal” is prejudiced in attitude yet adheres to the creed due to a fear of social repercussions. The “Fair-Weather Liberal” is not prejudiced, yet will sometimes discriminate when it seems to provide an advantage or when they are pressured by society to do so.
- Depending on the social environment (liberal or illiberal) as well as the typology of the person in question, different approaches should be undertaken to move towards a non-prejudiced, non-discriminatory society.

Two Key Quotes:

“...the problems of racial and ethnic inequities are not expressible as a discrepancy between high cultural principles and low social conduct. It is a relation not between two variables...but between three: first, the cultural creed honored...and partly enacted into law; second, the beliefs and attitudes of individuals regarding the...creed; and third, the actual practices of individuals with reference to it” (pg. 131).

“The critical problem is to ascertain the proportions of fair-weather and all-weather illiberals in a given local population in order to have some clue to the probable effectiveness or ineffectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation” (pg. 136).

Two Questions:

- Merton does not provide any way of discerning to which type a person belongs. How would society distinguish fair-weather liberals from fair-weather illiberals, especially since Merton notes that they may behave in similar ways?

- Merton states that the American creed is not static, but rather that it is dynamic and also unevenly distributed (pg. 131). How should these typologies be assessed given that differences in the American creed exist?